

## A pond apart

# bmi, UA: different approaches

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I just spent more hours than I care to count flying between the US and a small middle east country to see my only daughter get married.

I have made the trip a number of times in the past; aside from the extended time confined inside a metal tube that can't possibly get off the ground, the trips were uneventful.

This trip was exceptional.

I booked my flight via British Midland International, a/k/a bmi - the lower case initials are how the carrier advertises itself.

My flight to London's Heathrow (LHR) was via United (UA), a US carrier and a "Star Alliance" code share with bmi.

## Something "different"

When I checked in with UA, I received a boarding pass for the UA leg only. I am accustomed to receiving tickets/boarding passes for all connecting flights.

My first clue that this trip would be "different."

The UA Boeing 777 was "OK." The UK-based flight attendants (FAs) were efficient and the flight generally uneventful - a good thing.

Arriving at LHR I discovered that I had to follow the purple signs for what seemed about a 1/2 mile to reach UK security where I presented my laptop and carryon for inspection.

Once past security, I had to find the bmi counter to request a boarding pass.

Boarding pass in hand, I walked another 1/2 mile (although it was beginning to seem longer) to the last gate on the row to board the bmi flight to my destination.

Boarding was on time and I made my way to my assigned seat: 29A.

On the way, I bumped into two fellow travelers who complained that someone was seating in their assigned seats.

The bmi FA reacted as if double booking was normal and let the two move into business class.

When I reached Row 29 I discovered that 29A was occupied.

I talked to the nearest FA who said "Not to worry" a seat would be found.

About the same time a young woman reported the same problem and received the same nonchalant response.

We eventually found alternate spaces and, seemingly, everything would be fine.

Take off was OK.

## **Box lunch ?**

Shortly after take off meals were served.

When the FA offered me a meal I told her that I ordered a special meal.

She asked my name, checked her list and told me I should be sitting in 29A.

Yes, I agreed, I SHOULD be sitting in 29A, but bmi let someone else sit there and moved me to this space; so where is my special meal.

"We gave it to the passenger in 29A."

Never mind that the meal not only had the seat location written on it, it also had my name on it.

Apparently none of the bmi FAs nor the passenger in 29A could read since the meal stayed at 29A and I went without.

I did get an "I'm so sorry," but I would have preferred - if not the meal I carefully ordered long before the flight - some snacks which the plane most assuredly carried. The FA quickly disappeared, never to return.

Strike One for bmi.

Actually Strike Two since UA, with some personnel who apparently have little respect for bmi, failed to provide documentation for the entire flight; I booked with bmi and therefore expect it to assure its Star Alliance partners represent it in the best possible light. UA did properly ticket my luggage to the final destination.

Aside from the meal matter, the flight to my destination was satisfactory. Aside from the hunger pangs.

## **Back to the USA**

Returning to the US was another matter.

I had to show up at the airport very early to clear passport control and security. I know this airport and I know the drill. No surprises.

Once clear of security, I presented myself at the bmi ticket counter to get hand over two bags.

And there, along with a growing line, I stood for about 45 minutes waiting for a bmi person to come to work.

Finally a team of locals-employed-by-bmi appeared and, after setting up shop, started to take care of the passengers.

The young lady with whom I dealt apparently was a novice.

She had numerous problems with the computer but the nearby supervisor managed to help out.

When she finally thought she had everything ready she asked, to confirm what she thought she knew, if London was my final destination.

No, I replied; I'm continuing to the U.S.

Back to square one.

Eventually the luggage was properly tagged to my final destination and I made my way to the gate - the first 1/2 mile walk of the day, but one without pressure. My bmi flight was slated to board at 6:35 and it was not yet 5:30 a.m. Pushback was scheduled for 7:05.

When I got to the gate, the Alitalia Airlines crew was waiting for its flight's last passengers.

Being curious, I asked the locals which of them spoke Italian. Alitalia, after all, is an Italian airline.

No one, I was told. We speak one (of the two) local language and English.

What about, I asked, if a passenger doesn't speak either language; only Italian?

Well, the Big Bosses speak Italian, I was told.

While waiting for my bmi flight I listened as flights were called for Polish and Greek airlines - again, the announcements were only in one of the two local languages and English; not Polish or Greek.

The Alitalia locals eventually abandon the counter and bmi passengers start to fill the waiting area seats.

### **Where are bmi staff?**

Unfortunately no one shows up from bmi.

Finally a couple of local bmi staff from the ticketing desk show up and the aircraft comes to the gate.

The clock moves past 6:35 and no boarding.

At 7 a.m. still no boarding. Remember, the flight is scheduled to push back at 7:05 and there is no way this Airbus 321 can be loaded in 5 minutes.

We eventually get to board - we are told there was something amiss in the baggage hold - and we push back at about 7:30.

Aside. If something was suspicious with a checked bag, why didn't someone remove the suspect bag(s) and allow the flight to leave on time. If the suspect baggage was OK, it could be put on a following flight.

The flight to LHR was uneventful. The FA who brought my special meal to my assigned seat actually asked my name before handing over the food. Proper procedure.

While the flight was uneventful, the arrival was not. Instead of arriving at 10:30 we got to the gate, after some extra on-ground delay, at 11:15 a.m. My connecting UA flight is scheduled to depart at noon.

When I finally got off the full-to-capacity A321, I had the race to Heathrow security then the UA counter to get a boarding pass, then ...

Fortunately, UA had a passenger agent stationed near the UA counter directing people from the bmi flight to the UA "express check-in" lane. (Point for UA!)

Quickly provided a boarding pass I head down to the v-e-r-y l-a-s-t gate. Making as much speed as my legs allow and waving my free arm over my head like a

semaphore, I make my way to the gate and become the flight's last passenger to board.

Did my luggage make it?

I don't know. Neither does the UA fellow that asks if I had stowed luggage.

Two bags, I say, slightly out of breath; I hand him my passport with the luggage ID tags stuck on.

He checks.

Positive response.

## **Homeward bound**

I settle in.

UA919 pushed back at 12:01 p.m. - right on schedule.

Unlike bmi, UA was prepared.

It had people in place to expedite documentation.

It had people in place to confirm baggage transfer.

The 7-hour flight to the U.S. port-of-entry was eventful in two respects.

First, we arrived a full 30 minutes ahead of schedule AND immediately got a gate.

Second, the GPS flight map that fascinates me for the duration was "hung up" in the previous flight from the U.S. That was disconcerting.

When I was a kid I loved to fly.

Now, "slightly" older, I have lost my love of air travel, partially because I dislike being squeezed into a narrow seat with minimal legroom for hours at a time, and partly because I encounter so much ineptness in the air and on the ground.

I can "mitigate" the seat width and legroom by paying a premium, but I have to depend on the carriers and the airports to mitigate the ineptitude. So far, it seems mitigation has not been considered an option by bmi.

I confess my trip wasn't marred by a BA caterer strike or a LHR Terminal 5 (or Denver terminal) fiasco, but there were enough little things to get this Enterprise Risk Management practitioner's attention and to convince him that he'll take his business elsewhere in the future.